

Inquiry into the impact of climate change on Queensland agricultural production

Submission No: 19
Submitted by: The Wilderness Society
Publication:
Attachments:
Submitter Comments:

The Wilderness Society's Submission: Impact of climate change on Queensland agricultural production

For more information on this submission please contact:

Hannah Schuch, Queensland Campaigns Manager

Email: [REDACTED]

24th August 2023

About the Wilderness Society

The Wilderness Society is an independent, community-based, not-for-profit environmental advocacy organisation. Our vision is to transform Australia into a society that protects, respects and connects with the natural world that sustains us. We are committed to protecting, promoting and restoring wilderness across the continent for the survival and ongoing evolution of life on Earth. From community activism to national campaigns, we seek to give nature a voice to support the life that supports us all. We are powered by more than 150,000 supporters and we represent tens of thousands of supporters who want to see an end to deforestation across Queensland and continentally.

Ecological and climate impacts of deforestation and land clearing

The Wilderness Society welcomes the opportunity to address the Qld Government's Inquiry into the impact of climate change on Queensland Agricultural Production. However, it is the Wilderness Society's position that the focus of this inquiry is misplaced. The inquiry on the impacts of agricultural production on biodiversity loss and climate change.

The Queensland Government's latest Statewide Landcover and Trees Study (SLATS) revealed that 349,399 hectares of land was cleared between 2020 and 2021.¹ 89% of this clearing was linked to

¹ Department of Environment, land and water (2022). Key findings | 2020-21 SLATS Report.
<https://www.qld.gov.au/environment/land/management/mapping/statewide-monitoring/slats/slats-reports/2020-21-slats>



pasture. The meat and livestock industry sector makes up the vast majority of agricultural land use in Australia through its management of land used for grazing of native vegetation and modified pastures². The Wilderness Society's analysis has shown that at least 69% of land clearing activity in the last reporting period (2020-21) is linked to beef. This widespread deforestation and land clearing has a devastating impact on biodiversity and is contributing to dangerous climate change.

Eastern Australia is now recognised as a deforestation front, placing the country alongside prominent tropical deforestation hotspots such as the Amazon, Borneo and the Congo³ and unfortunately the data shows that Queensland is leading this destructive charge.

Queensland Government scientists report that land clearing⁴:

- "causes species death and habitat loss [and fragmentation]..."
- "Reduces the resilience of threatened species populations to survive future perturbations such as climate change..."
- "[has] Significant negative impacts off site e.g. (sediment runoff into streams, rivers, wetlands and the Great Barrier Reef marine lagoon)..."
- "[is] A major contributor to climate change..."
- "[is] Directly responsible for two plant species becoming extinct in the wild..."
- "[is a] threatening process for many of the 739 threatened flora species and 210 threatened fauna species in Queensland..."

In addition to the damage to ecosystems and tens of millions of native animals that are injured, left homeless or killed annually by this scale of clearing⁵ bulldozing trees worsens climate change by contributing to carbon pollution. Carbon pollution from deforestation is now equal to a third of all coal-fired power stations in Australia, or approximately 10% of Australia's overall domestic emissions.⁶ Additionally, carbon dioxide is released into the atmosphere when the fallen trees are left to burn or rot.

*"In Queensland, forest lands and harvested wood products are a carbon 'sink' (i.e. where carbon is stored in soil, plants or trees rather than released into the air). Unlike most other Australian jurisdictions, Queensland is a net source of LULUCF emissions rather than a net 'sink'. Vegetation clearing is the main source of Queensland's LULUCF GHG emissions."*⁷

[-report/key-findings](#)

² Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment, ABARES. (2022). Insights: Snapshot of Australian Agriculture 2022. https://daff.ent.sirsidynix.net.au/client/en_AU/search/asset/1033241/0

³ Pacheco, P., Mo, K., Dudley, N., Shapiro, A., Aguilar-Amuchastegui, N., Ling, P.Y., Anderson, C., & Marx, A., (2021). Deforestation Fronts: drivers and responses in a changing world. WWF. https://www.fint.awsassets.panda.org/downloads/deforestation_fronts_-_drivers_and_response_in_a_changing_world_-_full_report_1.pdf

⁴ Neldner V.J. et al (2017). Scientific review of the impacts of land clearing on threatened species in Queensland. Queensland Government, Brisbane.

⁵ Finn, H.C. & Stephens, N.S., (2017). The invisible harm: land clearing is an issue of animal welfare. Wildlife Research (CSIRO Journal). CSIRO Publishing. p.4

⁶ Australian Government, Department of Environment and Energy, (2017). Australia's emission projections 2017—chart data. Commonwealth of Australia: Canberra, ACT. Accessed online at:

<http://www.environment.gov.au/climate-change/publications/emissions-projections-2017>
⁷<https://www.stateoftheenvironment.des.qld.gov.au/pollution/greenhouse-gas-emissions/land-use-land-use-change-and-forestry-sector-greenhouse-gas-emissions#:~:text=Vegetation%20clearing%20is%20the%20main.to%20changes%20in%20g>



Furthermore, the off site impacts of land clearing, such as sediment runoff into rivers and reef catchments, are further jeopardising vulnerable ecosystems already at risk from climate change impacts.

Global opportunities to address deforestation

Having signed on to various international declarations and agreements, Australia is in the position to be a global leader on biodiversity protection and climate action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The Federal government has committed to the Glasgow Declaration to end deforestation and accelerate legislation, regulations and funding programs to “conserve forests and other terrestrial ecosystems and accelerate their restoration”⁸ for nature and the climate.

Embedded within the Global Biodiversity Framework, under Target 10, is the obligation of governments to manage agriculture, aquaculture, fisheries, and forestry responsibly. This mandate aims to curtail detrimental impacts on both natural and cultural values. Within this purview, heightened attention is required to counteract the harmful repercussions of deforestation and land clearing, as these actions possess the potential to compound issues of biodiversity loss and climate change.

Furthermore, Target 15 within the GBF framework may be seen as a guiding principle that steers responsible practices across the sector. This target stresses the importance of consistent surveillance, rigorous evaluation, and transparent communication concerning risks, dependencies, and effects on biodiversity. As well as setting strong targets to achieve the desired outcomes for the environment. If there is an imperative for carbon targets, there should be for biodiversity loss. Beyond a mere necessity, this endeavour stands as a moral duty.

As a signatory to the Glasgow Declaration on Forests, it is incumbent on the Australian government to accelerate legislation, regulations and funding programs to “conserve forests and other terrestrial ecosystems and accelerate their restoration”⁹ for nature and the climate.

Considering these commitments and ambitions, and with the recently introduced European Union deforestation regulations, the Queensland government has the opportunity to genuinely work with the land sector and key supply chain actors to secure genuine traceability methods that screen deforestation and therefore, climate risk in supply chains in so doing ensure market access is not compromised by deforestation, climate and biodiversity risk due to poor and high-carbon emitting land practices.

The corporate sector also holds significant social and financial responsibilities in proactively ensuring Australia meets emissions targets. Banks, retailers and investors all play a role in promoting sustainable practices and supporting the transition to net zero and as key economic stakeholders should be held accountable to the country’s land sector emissions targets.

[overnment%20regulation.](#)

⁸ Glasgow Leaders’ Declaration on Forests and Land Use:

<https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20230418175226/https://ukcop26.org/glasgow-leaders-declaration-on-forests-and-land-use/>

⁹ Glasgow Leaders’ Declaration on Forests and Land Use:

<https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20230418175226/https://ukcop26.org/glasgow-leaders-declaration-on-forests-and-land-use/>



Phasing out Australia's land carbon emissions

Rightfully assessing, measuring and phasing out Queensland's land carbon emissions is crucial to determining progress towards reducing Australia's greenhouse gas emissions. Land plays a key role as a carbon sink, with landscapes such as forests storing carbon and regulating the Earth's temperature¹⁰.

The science is clear that in order to reach the 1.5 degrees temperature goals set out under the Paris Climate Agreement, we have to stop fossil fuel and deforestation emissions and sequester as much carbon as possible via natural ecosystem restoration.

Australia, namely Queensland, is one of the best places worldwide to succeed in mass landscape restoration due to the amount of cleared arable land per person and wealth. There are further opportunities in better fire management in a range of forest ecosystems, and in northern savannas; likewise in coastal wetland restoration and feral animal control—all of which have capacity to substantially bring down greenhouse gas emissions.

There is clearly potential to completely reverse the current scenario and instead dramatically increase Queensland's native tree cover and landscape health while transforming the economic and ecological future of regional and rural Australia. As the Climate Change Authority has said "It no longer makes sense to think about lowering carbon emissions as a cost. It is a source of competitive advantage." The restoration economy means employment opportunities and benefits for communities in a decarbonising world.

To preserve Queensland's forests and grow land carbon stocks and flows, the hierarchy of priority actions is to (1) stop deforestation, land clearing and native forest logging (2) protect regrowth and allow natural regeneration to occur (3) better manage land with fire and ferals and (4) restore and revegetate. We have a unique opportunity to reset the clock on Australia's treatment of the land; turning from destruction to restoration all the while sequestering carbon for a safe climate future.

These must be pursued alongside - not instead of - decarbonisation of other parts of the Australian economy. Land carbon is a big part of the solution, but not the sole solution, and alone cannot deliver the deep emission cuts required to meet our Paris Agreement obligations.

¹¹

Solutions

There is an appetite for change in the sustainable management of Queensland forests and bushland. Change that is both economically and ecologically viable, while protecting Queensland's forests is critical to achieving Australia's carbon reduction target. A Griffith University study found that protecting and restoring native forests is a critical mitigation action if Australia is to meet its 43% carbon reduction target by 2030¹². Forests play a significant role in carbon storage and carbon reduction targets. We have listed some of the potential solutions for curbing deforestation to safeguard, nature and the climate below:

¹⁰ <https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/science/climate-issues/land>

¹¹ Please also see our submission in response to Climate-related financial disclosures, available here: <https://treasury.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-04/c2022-314397-wilderness-society.pdf>

¹² Australian National University (2022, October 14). Stopping native forest logging key to getting to net zero in Australia. Phys.org. <https://phys.org/news/2022-10-native-forest-key-net-australia.html>



Setting strong targets, implementation and verification

In order to phase out land carbon emissions caused by deforestation and land clearing, the state government must:

- implement sectoral targets of zero deforestation and clearing, logging or burning of HCV forests and bushlands;
- separate land sector emissions reduction targets from non-land sectors in national climate accounts;
- regularly report on both deforestation and afforestation targets to allow for greater transparency and tracking of progress. There must be full and transparent disaggregation of data with the Land Use, Land Use Change and Forestry (LULUCF) sector reporting;
- fund and resource biodiversity conservation targets (such as the 2030 Protected Area Strategy) to understand protecting Queensland's HCV forests and bushlands as a means of climate mitigation and adaptation;
- support sector-wide agreements and sector-wide implementation plans to implement commitments. This includes the development of monitoring, reporting and verification systems for relevant supply chains and production systems;
- take steps to eliminate greenwashing. Sustainability claims without evidence or action are increasingly contentious and, in their own right, can create risk. Sustainability claims must be genuine and backed by due diligence, effective timelines, and demonstrable actions.¹³

Strengthening laws

In 2017, the Palaszczuk government committed to “drive down excessive land clearing rates” and to re-introduce legislation to amend the Vegetation Management Act 1999 (VMA) to restore those removed under the Newman government. The Vegetation Management and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2018 (the Bill) was meant to “protect remnant and high conservation regrowth vegetation”. This Bill made many welcome and important improvements to vegetation management in Queensland including;

- Removing high-value agriculture as a relevant clearing purpose
- Reprotecting high conservation value (HCV) regrowing woodlands, under a broader definition that includes ecologically significant woodlands that are 15 or more years old
- Scrapping the ‘thinning’ self-assessable accepted development clearing code
- Extending riparian area protections to all Great Barrier Reef catchments
- Enabling landholders to voluntarily reclassify Category X into Category A with landholders’ agreement, to support the Land Restoration Fund and other initiatives
- Reinstating Riverine Protection Permits
- Revoking the Area Management Plan for Mulga Lands Fodder Harvesting
- Revoking the ‘Managed thickened vegetation’ accepted development code by subsequent regulation.

Despite this, the intention of the 2018 reforms has not been achieved as land clearing continues at unacceptably high rates because:

¹³ We note our related recommendations to the Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communications Inquiry into greenwashing are included here at Appendix 1.



- The amendments did not go far enough
- The acceptable development codes adopted after the VMA was amended were too weak
- Neither the legislation nor the codes have been properly enforced. *(Please note, the Wilderness Society welcomes the recent Queensland budget injection of funding into compliance and enforcement.)*

Strengthening the Land Restoration Fund

Currently, the main incentive scheme in Queensland is the Land Restoration Fund (LRF) which aims to promote the protection and restoration of native vegetation which can otherwise be cleared. As the 20/21 SLATS land clearing report clearly demonstrates, the adoption of projects has not catalysed change at the rate required. Reforms are required to ensure greater uptake and adoption.

The Land Restoration Fund was designed to build on the commitments of land clearing law reform including driving down tree clearing rates, legislating the end of broadscale clearing of remnant (older, established) vegetation, and protecting high conservation value regrowing woodlands. It has developed methods of increasing biodiversity and achieved a portfolio of funded projects. However, it hasn't yet reached the level of uptake necessary to catalyse a wider market of projects, establish the industries and infrastructure to support more efficient carbon farming, or protect a significant proportion of Category X that was originally part of the objectives.

The Land Restoration Fund was intended to create incentives to ensure areas are restored for biodiversity and carbon outcomes, and it is designed to be a complementary incentive for retaining woodlands.

Corporate demand is anticipated to grow with the voluntary market maturing and the creation of a listed exchange for ACCUs. The Queensland Government could catalyse a new industry that connects this demand for offsets with a supply of good quality and high transparency projects and supports regional economies to develop local carbon farming industries.

We recommend that the LRF should:

- Develop methods for ACCUs that allow it to work for Qld's forests and bushland
- Funding - possibly doubling funding to \$1bn
- Continue and deepen engagement and explanation with landholders
- Focus on Cat X and clearing of remnant under Cat B

The incentive should also be expanded to enable protection of remnant and regrowth vegetation in Category X. These areas should then be mapped as Category B or Category C and therefore regulated under the Vegetation Management Act 1999, with options for additional protection provided such as conservation covenants or Nature Refuges.

Corporate action along the beef supply chain

Domestically and internationally there is growing demand for sustainably sourced produce, in particular, beef.

As mentioned above, with the recently introduced European Union deforestation regulations, the



Queensland government has the opportunity to work across the agricultural industry and with key supply chain actors to secure genuine traceability methods that screen deforestation and therefore, climate risk in supply chains, and in so doing ensure market access is not compromised by deforestation, climate and biodiversity risk due to poor and high-carbon emitting land practices.

The corporate sector also holds significant social and financial responsibilities in proactively ensuring Queensland meets emissions targets. Banks, retailers and investors all play a role in promoting sustainable practices and supporting the transition to net zero and as key economic stakeholders should be held accountable to the country's land sector emissions targets.

Supporting sustainable land management

While deforestation and land clearing linked to beef remains an issue for nature and the climate, there is a growing amount of landholders practising sustainable management.

Previous analysis by the Wilderness Society has revealed that between 2019-20 87% of land parcels in Queensland that were linked to beef were deforestation free (during the reporting period) - that's 47,243 land parcels linked to beef that did not clear any forest.

Conclusion

The alarming scale of deforestation and land clearing in Queensland, coupled with the associated biodiversity loss and carbon emissions, places the state front and centre among national and global environmental concerns. For the Queensland government to be taken seriously in the fight against climate change, they must shift the focus of this inquiry from the Impacts of Climate Change on the agricultural industry, to agriculture's effects on climate, the interplay between deforestation and loss of biodiversity and the ramifications for the climate crisis. The evidence is clear - the agricultural industry is the primary source for deforestation and land clearing in Queensland, therefore the adoption of sustainable land management practices to ensure the preservation of vital ecosystems and mitigate carbon emissions is critical.

The Wilderness Society advocates for a collaborative effort that engages all stakeholders – communities, government bodies, corporations, and landowners – to establish robust targets, set strong implementation and verification standards, fortify legislative frameworks, and support sustainable land management practice. The state government has a responsibility to curb carbon emissions linked to deforestation, but also to safeguard the rich biodiversity across the region for generations to come.